

25 August 1977

State/INR-CIA/NSA Intelligence Memorandum

The Next Two Years: Brezhnev, or a Succession?
Implications for US Policy

THE QUESTIONS

How do we estimate Brezhnev's current personal and political health? What are the chances of his leaving power in the next year or two?

If Brezhnev leaves power within the next year or two, how long and orderly or otherwise is the early succession period likely to be?

What are the short-term policy implications of the succession for the US?

What succession scenarios are likely? Possible? With what varying policy implications for the US?

KEY JUDGMENTS

Brezhnev's Staying Power

--Barring an unlikely but unpredictable heart attack or stroke, there is no specific reason to expect Brezhnev to die or be incapacitated enough to have to leave office in the next year or two.

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--Whether Brezhnev will be removed or eased into figurehead status by his colleagues is also essentially unforeseeable. If this should happen, we judge that the real cause would probably be his colleagues' perceptions that Brezhnev was no longer consistent or vigorous enough to run the country, or--perhaps somewhat less likely--that the balance of his power and the collective's urgently needed redressing.

--On balance, we think there is a better than even chance that Brezhnev will remain in office for the next year or two.

Nature of the Succession Process

--Whenever Brezhnev leaves, the succession will probably have two phases, a first crisis when Brezhnev is replaced as party boss and head of the Party Secretariat, and a second and longer phase in which the new senior secretary attempts effectively to consolidate his power. The new leader must gain a working majority in the Politburo. Winning this influence comes chiefly through control of the Secretariat and its powerful staff departments, the government's economic ministries, the security organs and the military command, and the party's territorial organizations in the cities and republics.

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- It has taken several years -- an average of about five, depending on the criteria one uses in marking when the new top leader has consolidated power -- to resolve each of the three previous succession crises.
- Brezhnev himself is unlikely to want or be able to arrange the succession definitively.

Policy Implications

- The USSR currently faces serious economic and political problems, and the economic ones, in particular, are expected to worsen during the next half-dozen years. These problems will probably cause considerable division within the leadership, complicating efforts to resolve an early Brezhnev succession and consolidate power. It is thus more likely than not that the early years of the succession will be more troubled, at least within leadership circles.
- In all the most likely succession scenarios, the leadership will be more collegial than it has been in the recent past and will probably avoid taking foreign policy initiatives with far-reaching implications, although foreign policy issues could become the forum for political maneuvering within the leadership. Soviet foreign policy focus

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is likely to be on urgent matters rather than on items which require long-term planning and consensus-building among varied elite groups. The leadership would of course respond vigorously to perceived significant threats to Soviet security or interests. Otherwise, its energies will be devoted primarily to domestic concerns.

--Political succession will probably slow down the pace of Soviet-US relations and tend to a further gradual cooling. Selective detente, however, should remain the framework of Soviet foreign policy after Brezhnev. A loss of momentum in the conduct of detente need not result in an overall destabilization of the US-Soviet relationship.

--The Soviets' perceptions of their foreign economic requirements include both a desire to use Western technology in order to modernize the economy and the periodic necessity of importing food and feedgrains. On the other hand, the drop in Soviet oil production anticipated in the next few years will seriously erode Soviet hard currency earnings needed to purchase Western products. We expect Soviet choices over trade policies in the next few years to be difficult and contentious.

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- In SALT, any achievable strategic arms limitation agreement at this stage can at best temper the competition for some form of strategic advantage, primarily through restraining weapons development programs. A lapse of two to five years in SALT, on the other hand, especially without some arrangement to extend the Interim Agreement, would have an unsettling effect. Pressures for the development and deployment of new weapon systems will mount, and the hazard of a downward spiral in US-Soviet relations would increase.
- Other substantive and atmospheric strains in the bilateral relationship could accumulate to the point that any top level decision on either side to resume a specific search for improved relations would encounter great difficulty, both in obtaining the support of a domestic consensus and in interesting the other superpower.
- In some circumstances, the potential for Soviet miscalculations in dealing with the non-Communist world would be considerably higher than in the recent past. Some Soviet leaders can intermittently be expected to urge that higher priority be given to maintaining internal self-sufficiency, furthering

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the common objectives of the socialist movement, and projecting Moscow's influence elsewhere abroad, than to limited cooperation with the US.

--The foreign policy influence of these tougher elements could increase markedly if they come to believe that the then extant leadership threatens their perquisites and jeopardizes the security of the Soviet state. Such propensities to be accommodating with the West as exist would be overwhelmed by obduracy.

Succession Scenarios

--It is conceivable though unlikely that Brezhnev's colleagues might ease him into figurehead status should his performance become uneven enough to cause them to conclude he could no longer handle the general secretary job, instead of pushing him out of the leadership altogether into retirement. Brezhnev might ^{reluctantly} prefer to acquiesce, ~~rather than get out altogether~~. We attach perhaps a 10 percent possibility to this scenario. Should it occur, Brezhnev's own policy influence would presumably be drastically curtailed, and the above policy implications of ^a ~~the most likely~~ collective period of succession would probably obtain.

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--Brezhnev's actual departure from office in the next year or two would give Kirilenko, his unofficial deputy in the party a 70 percent chance of becoming general secretary. All things considered, however, a reasonable estimate of the probability that Kirilenko would be able to consolidate his rule and maintain it for several years is less than even, say 30 percent. The greater likelihood is that there will be a two-stage succession.

--There is perhaps a 30 percent chance that someone else will succeed Brezhnev even initially. While he is unlikely to come from outside the present top leadership, he could be any number of people now in it. These leaders each at present have one or more handicaps to overcome in filling out their credentials for a claim to the top job, but if the Brezhnev succession is delayed or, as may well happen, in two or more stages, one or more of these men could well improve their power and experience. The initial crisis of a succession in the next two years of a younger man might be sharper and the leadership's instability more manifest than under Kirilenko, with an even stronger urge to concentrate on domestic affairs and with conflicting tendencies in foreign policy.

--There is an outside chance, say 10 percent, initially and 20 to 30 percent later on, that a strong, innovative, new general secretary will emerge to capitalize on the manifest need to rejuvenate the Politburo, Central Committee, and middle levels of the party as well as to stimulate the economy. Such a succession scenario would probably impact most on US interests as the party chief would be less dependent on the collective and freer to pursue dynamic policies, for better or worse.

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THE DIRECTOR OF
CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

National Intelligence Officers

25 August 1977

MEMORANDUM FOR: State Department
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Rm. 4758
New State x29204

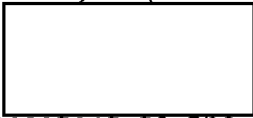
National Security Agency


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SUBJECT : Brezhnev Succession Paper

Attached are the Key Judgments on the
Brezhnev Succession paper.


Assistant to the
National Intelligence Officer
for USSR-EE

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Attachment

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